



Champaign County Forest Preserve District

Master Plan

2010

Table of Contents

Section I	Introduction.....	2
Section II	Champaign County Overview.....	7
Section III	Financial and Human Resources.....	12
Section IV	Preserves and Facilities.....	15
Section V	Land Management	25
Section VI	The Visitor Experience	27

Section I - Introduction

By studying the resources that make up the Champaign County Forest Preserve District as well as the District's relationship with the Champaign County community, one can conceptualize its current operations and future plans in regard to its mission. This document provides an overview of these resources along with their potential and District staff's plans to use them in continued efforts to maintain natural areas and local history for the people of Champaign County. Following each section readers will find text boxes with recommendations to guide this effort.

Master Plan Purpose Statement: The Master Plan will be used to guide long-range planning for the natural areas, facilities, and programs that fulfill the Champaign County Forest Preserve District's mission by providing a review of current practices, future needs, potential, and recommendations to help in fulfilling its mission.

Champaign County Forest Preserve District Overview

Mission Statement: We are stewards of our county's natural and historic resources through conservation, education, and the compatible outdoor recreation experiences we provide at Champaign County's Forest Preserves.

Vision Statement: To hold a valued and vital place in the lives of Champaign County residents and be recognized for innovation, leadership, and excellence

Guiding Principles

1. The protection, preservation, and restoration of the lands and waters set aside by the Forest Preserve District shall be of paramount importance and shall guide all decision making.
2. We shall provide recreational and educational opportunities consistent with the preservation and management of the Forest Preserve District's natural and historic resource base.
3. We shall base policy and management decisions on accepted natural resource management practices and sound scientific principles and research. We shall also apply best management practices in environmental education/interpretation and outdoor recreation planning.
4. Because we want to provide enjoyable experiences for our visitors, we shall aim to exceed the expectations of our guests. We believe that these experiences begin even before our guests arrive; therefore, marketing and education, staff attitudes and conversations, and overall appearance and management of our preserves shall be critical elements.
5. Our primary aim for visitors is that they develop an appreciation for our natural and historic resources, see the importance of these resources to human well-being, and work to protect those resources both at home and at our preserves.
6. We shall maintain and improve the integrity and credibility of our agency.

7. We shall value our staff and provide a positive and safe work environment, appropriate orientation and training, coaching and evaluation, and opportunities for professional development.
8. We shall practice fiscal responsibility by using accepted accounting principles and best practices in financial management. We shall plan for the future with financial sustainability in mind.
9. We shall pursue opportunities to provide new preserves and add buffers to existing preserves when appropriate, while maintaining sensitivity to the needs of Champaign County residents for business, agriculture, and community services.
10. We shall seek appropriate partnerships with businesses, community organizations, and individuals who share our common goals, guiding principles, and interests.

Downstate Forest Preserve Act

These excerpts from the Downstate Forest Preserve Act illustrate the expectations under which the forest preserve was originally established:

(70 ILCS 805/5) (from Ch. 96 1/2, par 6308) Sec. 5. Any forest preserve district organized under this Act shall have the power to create forest preserves, and for that purpose shall have the power to acquire in the manner hereinafter provided, and hold lands containing one or more natural forests or parts thereof or land or lands connecting such forests or parts thereof, or lands capable of being forested, or capable of being restored to a natural condition, for the purpose of protecting and preserving the flora, fauna, and scenic beauties within such district, and to restore, restock, protect and preserve the natural forests and such lands together with their flora and fauna, as nearly as may be, in their natural state and condition, for the purpose of the education, pleasure, and recreation of the public.

Recreational authority of forest preserves was defined in 1966 as:

(70 ILCS 805/18.1) (from Ch. 96 1/2, par 6335) Sec. 18.1. Any forest preserve district in a county with a population of less than 3,000,000, has the power from time to time, before, on, or after the effective date of this amendatory Act of 1996, to construct, equip, acquire, extend, improve, restore, maintain, and operate recreational and cultural facilities, including but not limited to natatoriums, swimming pools, ice skating rinks, tennis courts, golf courses, toboggan slides, ski areas, museums, historic buildings, botanical gardens, cultural and environmental education centers, or any combination thereof, and all necessary related facilities, such as but not limited to gift shops, cafeterias, snack bars, restaurants, or any combination thereof, to borrow money therefore, and as evidence thereof, to issue and sell bonds.

History of the Champaign County Forest Preserve District

The following is an excerpt of a discussion with Dr. Karl B. Lohman, Professor of Landscape Architecture, during a meeting of the Champaign County Historical Society. In it he describes the early awareness and efforts to preserve Champaign County's natural areas through the development of a Forest Preserve District.

"The Forest Preserve idea was discussed during the 1920s among 119 members of a voluntary Forest Preserve Association. After a lapse of some 15 years the proposal was reactivated by the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission with its presentation of the proposal to the Champaign County Izaak Walton League. The members of that group in turn spearheaded the movement with enthusiastic and energetic support to the end that the proposal (county-wide referendum) was favorably voted upon and passed by a narrow margin of 22 votes in 1935. The principal opposition had come from the rural voters who were feeling the effects of the Depression. The opposition managed to delay the establishment of the Forest Preserve for a period of years until its creation in 1948."¹

A five-member commission was appointed and charged with the administration of the District. Lake of the Woods County Park was the first project initiated by the District with the initial purchase of 260 acres made in 1948.

Early District efforts at Lake of the Woods focused on facility development including the golf course, botanical garden, museum, and beach with its Sea Slide and paddle wheel. In more recent times, the District Board has focused its priorities to the preservation of natural areas and open space. The balance between facility development and maintenance of an aging infrastructure along with acquisition of additional open space is now and will continue to challenge the District.

Planning

This document facilitates long-range planning on a five-to-ten-year basis by serving as a comprehensive guide to District practices as well as recommended actions to help it reach its mission-based potential. However, there are many other planning documents with more specific content and shorter timelines that guide day-to-day operations and short-range planning. Below is a list and brief description of these plans as well as their implementation methods.

Strategic Plan and Action Plan

Approved by the Board of Commissioners, a Strategic Plan (Appendix I) guides short-term planning in the District. As a management tool, it outlines the District's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) with the purpose of ensuring thorough and purposeful planning on a three-to-five-year basis. It also prioritizes needs and resources to ensure the process is efficient. The Strategic Plan differs from the Master Plan in timeline and scope. It outlines the necessary steps the District will take to ultimately move toward fulfilling recommendations listed in the Master Plan. As it is updated more frequently than the Master Plan, staff can analyze resources and implement these steps at the most opportune times. To do this at an operational level, staff members develop an annual Action Plan, which outlines the necessary steps to accomplish the specific objectives listed in the Strategic Plan.

¹ Excerpt of talk by Dr. Karl B. Lohman, Professor of Landscape Architecture at a meeting of the Champaign County Historical Society, September 30, 1959.

❖ Continue short-range planning via the Strategic Plan, updating it every three years.

Environmental Assessment Plan

The research and development of an Environmental Assessment Plan (EAP) (Appendix II), an objective defined in the 2006 Strategic Plan, was fulfilled in the summer of 2008. The resulting document and its findings now set the benchmark for environmental responsibility in the District, including operations, planning, facility maintenance, and public programming.

The EAP is a comprehensive analysis that evaluates the degree of environmental sustainability in all District operations and facilities. It also provides ten objectives with detailed short- and long-term recommendations for implementing new initiatives and building upon already sustainable practices. Its guidance has made environmental responsibility a goal in all aspects of the District's operations and planning.

Interpretive Plan

As the medium through which visitors bond with local history and the natural world, effective interpretation is a high-priority in the District. All interpretation is guided by the District's Interpretive Plan (Appendix III) which was developed by the Education Department in the summer of 2008 and approved in November 2009. Like the Environmental Assessment Plan, it fulfills one of the objectives of the 2006 Strategic Plan. Although the Education Department has a leading role in interpreting the District's resources, this plan addresses interpretation at all levels and media types, such as informational signs, informal conversations, educational programs, and publications. In addition to guiding formal interpretation the document:

- focuses the District's mission-based selection of priorities for conservation, collection, education, and compatible outdoor recreation experiences;
- provides District employees with the resources needed to aid visitors in understanding what happened in the past as well as how and why Champaign County and East Central Illinois is what it is today;
- identifies the media and programs best suited for meeting visitor needs, achieving management goals, and telling District/county stories;
- presents the story of Champaign County in one voice and can be applied to all levels of interpretation as well as program and media planning; and
- outlines the goals and objectives of the Education Department in its effort to fulfill the CCFPD mission and encourages all CCFPD employees to implement these ideas when creating the visitors' experiences.

Golf Course Master Improvement Plan

In the spring of 1997 the Champaign County Forest Preserve District commissioned William James Spear & Associates-Golf Course Architects to develop a Master Improvement Plan (Appendix IV) with the purpose of evaluating the course's current state and making recommendations that would guide renovation to accommodate current and future play. With many of the goals completed, the District continues to use the document to guide decision-making and planning.

Site Plans

The Salt Fork and Middle Fork Site Plans were completed in 1999 and 1996, respectively. Both plans were developed by the Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) using the same method – development of a site inventory of the soils, hydrology, plants, and animals of the preserves. The resulting multi-layered database describes the ecosystems of the preserves, allowing for informed decision-making about future land use.

Natural Resources Management Plan

Based on the current goals, objectives, and tasks of the Natural Resources Department, this document is on a timeline to be completed by 2011. The Management Plan, which consists of five site-specific plans, guides land management with the goal of protecting and enhancing the natural resources of Champaign County through conservation, restoration, and preservation efforts on District-owned lands. The document serves as an evaluation and planning tool by outlining each site's current and historic land use, SWOT analysis, recommendations for surveying and monitoring the site's natural resources, and several "Individual Project Plans" which outline high-priority projects for the following five years.

Early American Museum Collection Policy

The Early American Museum's Collection Policy (Appendix V) establishes the principles, procedures, and legal responsibilities for the acquisition, care, loan and use of the collections of the Early American Museum. The museum is committed to maintaining standards of professional and ethical excellence in all its actions and embraces the standards set forth by the American Association of Museums.

Given the depth and breadth of the current collection, and in keeping with the mission to collect, preserve and interpret the history of East Central Illinois, specifically Champaign County, the Early American Museum has devised this collecting plan to guide its future. The story of Champaign County will be told not only from its uniqueness, but also as the story intersects with, reacts to, and relates with, regional, state, and national history.

Section II – Champaign County Overview

Champaign County is 997 square miles with an estimated population of 193,636 according to the 2008 census. Citizens reside in 186 taxing districts made up of two cities, 25 incorporated villages and a number of dispersed rural homes.

Estimated Age Distribution 2008

Under 5 years old	6%
Under 18 years old	20%
19 to 64 years old	64%
65 years old or older	10%

Estimated Racial Background 2008

White	75%
African American	11%
Asian	8%
Hispanic or Latino	4%
American Indian	<1%
Two plus races	2%

Major industries include farming, education, and medicine. Towns around the Champaign-Urbana area continue to develop at a fast pace. The surrounding small-town communities and rural atmosphere have drawn new residents from as far away as Rantoul, 20 miles to the north; Mahomet, 10 miles to the west; and St. Joseph, 10 miles to the east. As people move to these communities they are closer to the District's preserves in Mahomet, Fisher, Homer, and Penfield.

Almost 90% of the land is farmed, with corn and soybeans as primary crops. The multiple schools and colleges and the University of Illinois, located in Urbana-Champaign, provide residents with access to a wide variety of leisure pursuits including athletics, performing and visual arts, museums, restaurants, and nightlife. Although there are some low-impact outdoor recreation offerings through several park districts, the Forest Preserve District is a leader in areas such as boating, fishing, hiking, and bird-watching.

Carle Foundation Hospital, Provena Covenant Medical Center, Carle Clinic, and Christie Clinic make the county the leading medical provider in the region. After the University of Illinois, these industries also provide the majority of employment opportunities in the county along with retail and food service. Even with such established industries, there has been an increase in the local unemployment rate from 6.5% in 2008 to 7.7% in 2009. However, it is still below the state average of 10.5% and national average of 9.7%.

The economic climate of the state and nation has an impact on the Champaign County Forest Preserve District. Being an entity of local government, the District will need to maintain the support of its constituents. Economic recessions provide an opportunity for community members to re-evaluate how they spend their leisure time, often increasing the appreciation and use of local parks and forest preserves. Families and individuals tend to utilize recreation outlets close to their homes where they can still have a desired experience with little to no cost. Regardless of the economy's condition, the District is expected to provide a highly-valued service to the people of Champaign County.

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| ❖ Engage rural and village communities in ongoing discussion of county open space and recreation needs. |
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Environmental Sustainability

Environmental sustainability has become a high priority on a global, national, and local level. On a large scale, the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission has emphasized sustainability to its staff's long-range planning and day-to-day operation in an environmentally-responsible manner. This trend is also evident in nearly every community and through the initiatives of business owners, nonprofit agencies, and individuals. Sustainability-focused planning is evident in projects such as new construction, structure reclamation, recycling, consumerism, and energy production (i.e., proposed wind farms). While preservation and conservation have always been a priority for the District, it, too, has evaluated its level of environmental responsibility as seen through an Environmental Assessment Plan. This movement will be a catalyst for the District to connect with the community and individuals who are also making sustainability a priority in their lives.

Champaign County's Natural Resources and the Agencies that Maintain Them

The Champaign County Forest Preserve District is the pinnacle agency in the county in the provision of natural resource-based areas with its recreation, education, and conservation objectives. It is also the leading agency in the county in the amount of acreage under its jurisdiction, maintaining nearly 67% of the total green space in Champaign County. As a result, the Forest Preserve District has the widest range of natural resources preserved. Throughout the county, there is .03 acres of maintained green space per capita.

Agency	Acres
Champaign Park District	593.0
Urbana Park District	591.0
Rantoul Recreation Department	316.0
Rantoul Park District	215.0
Tolono Park District	10.2
Champaign County Forest Preserve District	3,858.0
TOTAL	5,583.2

Village Park Acres

A number of other villages in the county have parks, as noted in the following compilation, but generally have less comprehensive park and recreation programs than the park districts and the Forest Preserve District.

Village	Acres	Village	Acres
Mahomet	78.7	Fisher	2.0
Sadorus	20.0	Thomasboro	2.0
St. Joseph	14.9	Philo	1.5
Savoy	10.0	Sidney	1.5
Ogden	6.0	Longview	1.3
Gifford	5.0	Broadlands	1.1
Homer	3.5	Bondville	0.0
Royal	3.5	Ludlow	0.0
Pesotum	2.8		
TOTAL			153.8

University of Illinois

The University of Illinois has a number of areas that are open to the public for recreational or educational purposes (i.e., two golf courses and an arboretum). It also has a number of woodland and prairie areas that are preserved for research but are not open to general public use.

University of Illinois Public Space		
(Not Open To General Public)	Research Woodlands	220 acres
(Not Open To General Public)	Research Prairies	20 acres
	Arboretum	57 acres
Open To General Public	Golf Courses	200 acres
Total		497 acres

Ecosystems in Champaign County

Prairie

Originally, the county was mostly covered by wet and dry prairies. Native prairie remnants exist along some of the railroad rights-of-way and Tomlinson Cemetery near Middle Fork River Forest Preserve. In addition to ecosystem restoration efforts by the District, prairie reestablishment projects have been initiated on a smaller scale by other public and private entities in the area.

Forests

The forested area of Champaign County has been reduced from nearly 50,000 acres at the time of settlement to only about 7,000 acres today. Most of the original Champaign County forest land has been converted to agriculture. A considerable acreage of wooded land is being preserved in the Champaign County Forest Preserve District and to a lesser extent by the University of Illinois, Champaign Park District, Urbana Park District, and villages throughout the county. However, the greatest amount of woodland is privately owned and operated and remains primarily along or associated with river corridors.

Wetlands

Most of the wetlands of the county have been drained and converted to agricultural production. However, the river flood plains still exist as wetlands, and efforts of the Forest Preserve District, Urbana Park District, and others to reestablish wetlands are an important step in enhancing this unique natural resource.

Water Resources

Five important Illinois rivers have their headwaters in or very close to Champaign County – the Sangamon, Middle Fork, Salt Fork, Embarras and Kaskaskia rivers. The Sangamon, Middle Fork and Salt Fork rivers are the largest and most natural in character. Of the two smaller rivers, the Embarras obtains significant size in Champaign County, while the Kaskaskia River is a dredged ditch until it reaches the southern portion of the county. The Forest Preserve District as well as Champaign and Urbana park districts and the Village of Mahomet also have all established natural areas along these watercourses.

There are no natural lakes in Champaign County. All lakes and ponds in the county are man-made as a result of mining sand and gravel excavation. This includes bodies of water at the forest preserves, along highways, within subdivisions and at park district properties. These waters provide recreational opportunities, animal habitat, and aesthetics to the landscape. See Appendix VI for statistics on the District's water resources.

- ❖ Assess the Kaskaskia and Embarras watersheds for potential open space acquisition and preservation.

The Forest Preserve District's Community Partnerships

Ever since its inception, partnerships with individuals and groups have been crucial to the District's success. This has been true internally as well as in creating a presence in the communities and county. The District continues to seek out partnerships with agencies with complementary missions or that provide opportunities for resource sharing that will help both organizations reach their goals. This section describes a fraction of these invaluable affiliations to provide an overview of the types of partnerships, their longevity, and the potential for future ones.

- ❖ Partner with other districts and nonprofits to expand Forest Preserve District presence in Champaign County. Focus on urban areas (may need to consider transportation to and from District preserves).

Foundation Board

The mission of the Champaign County Forest Preserve District Foundation Board is to "preserve and enhance our natural and cultural resources by supporting, through fundraising, the programs and facility development of the Champaign County Forest Preserve District." It exists to accept contributions and gifts, promote fundraising activities, and provide assistance to the programs and projects of the Champaign County Forest Preserve District and its Board of Commissioners.

Citizens Advisory Committee

The Champaign County Forest Preserve District Board established the Citizens Advisory Committee to provide support to the District. The committee is comprised of community members with varying expertise, experience, and interests who provide service of an advisory and informative nature to the District. In addition, members of the committee promote community awareness of the District including its needs and accomplishments. They also help internally with policy review and project planning. Over the years, service on the Citizens Advisory Committee has often resulted in appointment to the District's Board of Commissioners.

Kickapoo Rail Trail Partnership

This is a unique partnership involving the Champaign County Design and Conservation Foundation (CCDC), the Vermilion County Conservation District (VCCD), the Champaign County Forest Preserve District, and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

Utilizing the federal Rail Banking Law, the CCDC took action more than a decade ago to preserve the railroad right-of-way between Urbana and Kickapoo State Park. Under the provisions of the law, the railroad (now owned by CSX Corporation) has been leasing the former right-of-way to CCDC pending a successful sale.

CCDC members have worked hard to preserve the line for future trail use but realized they were not equipped to eventually develop and manage the trail. They approached the CCFPD and VCCD to determine if each would be willing to be the eventual owner/managers of the trail in their respective counties. Both were willing, but VCCD was reluctant to take on ownership of the large trestle over the Middle Fork River. DNR stepped forward and pledged to take on that ownership and also to bring \$500,000 toward acquisition costs.

A 24-mile-long multi-use trail corridor is envisioned (hiking and bicycling) on a crushed stone surface. An adjacent equestrian trail on the right-of-way may also be possible. Other associated partners will include the small towns through which the trail will run. After many years of negotiations, it appears an agreement may be near.

❖ Develop Kickapoo Bike Trail as a gateway to District facilities and programs.

The Early American Museum's Partnerships

The Early American Museum, as part of the CCFPD, has recently collaborated with the Champaign County Board to install a multimedia exhibit "Abraham Lincoln: Large Presence in a Small Town" in the Champaign County Courthouse. This exhibit was funded by private donations and a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Since 2004, the Early American Museum has worked with the American History Teachers Collaborative (AHTC), funded by the U.S. Department of Education and administered through the Urbana School District. The museum has hosted, designed, facilitated, and presented material for Teacher Workshops through AHTC and has worked with teacher-fellows to study the Early American Museum collection and design curriculum, and website material around it. The National Council of Negro Women has collaborated with the museum on in-house, online and outreach exhibits and programs. The Graduate School of Library Science at the University of Illinois is working with the museum to assist with the digitizing of the collection for use in study, most recently with the files of the Doris Hoskins Archive.

Master Naturalist Partnership

The District along with the University of Illinois Extension and the Urbana Park District established the Illinois Chapter of the Master Naturalist Program. This program educates and trains a corps of volunteers who in turn provides support for the conservation, management, and interpretation of natural resources.

Participants attend classes led by expert educators from around the region. The curriculum provides Master Naturalists with a framework for understanding the natural world and how people fit into it. From specific topics such as reptiles and amphibians to in-depth study of the interdependence of an ecosystem's components and how human activities, past and present, have affected those systems, students receive a well-rounded experience. The District continues to benefit from its initial investment in the program by building relationships with participants who often serve as District volunteers or as Citizens Advisory Committee members.

❖ Continue to build community partnerships.
❖ Encourage “Friends Groups” for each preserve.
❖ Work with partners to preserve river corridors for water quality and wildlife habitat for the Sangamon, Salt Fork and Middle Fork rivers.

Section III - Financial and Human Resources

Financial Resources

The Champaign County Forest Preserve District expended \$5.7 million and realized \$5.1 million in revenues for 2008. These numbers represent all operating and capital financial transactions, including grants. In wages and benefits the District spent \$2.2 million for its 36 full-time and 80 seasonal employees. Salaries and benefits accounted for 66.18% of 2008 operating expenditures. This is down from 70.22% in 2004. The District closed the year with \$2.1 million in reserves which is more than was planned in the 2008 budget. Expenditures exceeded revenues in 2008 so that the District could:

- acquire and develop Sangamon River Forest Preserve;
- renovate the Lake of the Woods Golf Course entrance, parking areas, and cart paths;
- replace the superintendent’s residence at Middle Fork River Forest Preserve; and
- construct the River Bend Forest Preserve fishing pier.

The Champaign County Forest Preserve District is primarily funded through property taxes and user fees which usually make up approximately 60 and 30 percent, respectively, of annual revenues. In 2008 the District secured more than \$1.25 million in grants for 24% of total revenues, with property and replacement taxes accounting for \$2.8 million (54%) and user fees of \$870,000 (17%) responsible for most of the remainder. Two large grants toward the purchase of Sangamon River Forest Preserve accounted for the bulk of the grant monies.

Champaign County Forest Preserve District is the steward of 3,858 acres of public green space in Champaign County. The value of land, buildings, equipment, cash, and investments as stated in the 2008 annual audit is \$17,671,038 as of December 31, 2008. The District’s only long-term obligations are employee pensions (the Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund is the depository) and accrued leave. At close of 2008, pensions were funded at 89% of expected need, a drop from 107% at December 31, 2007. The 2008 financial markets decline is the reason for the drop in IMRF pension funding.

Annually, the District issues and repays General Obligation Bonds that support District facility and infrastructure repairs. These bonds cannot exceed \$200,000 because of limits established in the Property Tax Extension Limitation Law (PTELL), unless District voters approved an increase in the District’s debt ceiling.

For 2008 the District's limiting rate was .0779 of the Equalized Assessed Value (EAV) of taxable property in the District. Tax caps restrict annual limiting rate growth to the Consumer Price Index or five percent, whichever is less. Prior to the tax caps, the levy rate in 1995 was .1055 of the EAV, meaning that the District's taxing authority has been reduced by more than one quarter in less than 15 years. However, development in Champaign County in the 1990s and early 2000s has been sufficient to maintain operations at an adequate level.

The District added two forest preserves in the past seven years, River Bend and Sangamon River, and addressed a portion of its facility deferred maintenance. Acquiring additional open space has been possible almost solely through grants matched, in-kind, by the District; River Bend was 100% grant- and donor-funded and Sangamon River was 88% grant-funded. Addressing deferred maintenance has been possible to a limited extent through expending District reserves accumulated over a period of years. Given the age of District facilities (Museum - 40 years; Botanical Garden - 40 years; Lake of the Woods infrastructure - 40 to 60 years), maintenance will be an ongoing fiscal challenge.

❖ Implement regular condition assessments to ensure proper budgeting maintenance and rehabilitation for all facilities.

Human Resources

The Champaign County Forest Preserve District had 36 full-time and 80 part-time employees in 2008. This staffing level has remained relatively steady (between 32 and 36 full-time) over the past ten years. The District's work is labor intensive; caring for land, facilities, artifacts and exhibits; and providing educational and recreational programs. Full-time staff turnover has been relatively small, meaning the District has had a loyal but aging work force. A number of employees will be reaching retirement-eligible age in the coming years.

The District provides annual training to its full-time and seasonal employees, supports staff attendance and participation at professional conferences, and reimburses staff members who pursue higher education in areas that relate to their work with the District. Health and retirement benefits are District-provided as well to full-time employees. Permanent part-time employees (who work more than 1,000 hours annually) also participate in the District's retirement program.

Two ongoing District personnel issues are compensation and information technology. Generally, the District's Board's goal is to compensate staff at wages roughly comparable to those paid by the Urbana and Champaign park district plans. While the District has limited turnover, securing and retaining trained and skilled staff for certain positions has proven difficult. District communication and productivity are hindered by the lack of a common information technology network across the District and lack of broadband connectivity at particular District locations. Many labor-intensive administrative tasks can be eliminated through currently available technology solutions applied across a common network. Achieving this will free full-time staff across the District for more mission-focused work (customer services and education programming, habitat restoration, facility maintenance, etc.) and fewer administration tasks.

- ❖ Provide staff with necessary information technology to improve efficiency and effective communication, particularly for staff who work primarily in the field.

Internships

The District's strategic plan is visionary, and implementing it is a challenge. In addition to stewarding two additional properties, staff is addressing increasingly stringent objectives in caring for District lands and waters, and striving to expand educational programs and events that highlight Champaign County's natural and cultural resources.

To meet the challenges posed by the District's Strategic Plan, staff has sought interns with the aptitude to address key objectives such as the Environmental Assessment Report that baselined the District's greening efforts and outlined potential objectives for the future. Similarly, the District's Interpretive Plan, which provides a framework and themes for integrating both the cultural and natural aspects of the District's mission and Facility Condition Assessment and Inventory, key to future facility maintenance and District fiscal sustainability, are possible because of the able assistance of interns selected for these particular purposes. Expanding the District's intern program is an important future goal toward improving the quality of operations and customer service.

- ❖ Expand (and add non-wage incentives to) internship program to secure cutting-edge skills and fresh ideas that will benefit specific District programs or objectives.

Volunteers

Volunteerism is one of the essential factors contributing to the District's success. For example, Early American Museum volunteers assist with artifact preparation, exhibit development, minor facility repairs, delivering programs, supporting special events, and providing visitor services. Lincoln's Challenge Academy in Rantoul has worked for years assisting the Natural Resources Department at Middle Fork River Forest Preserve. In recent years they have been utilized at the Botanical Garden in Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve as well. Events like Freedom Fest would simply not be possible without the dedicated work of District volunteers.

Volunteers have long been an essential part of District operations, and in 2003 the District created a part-time Volunteer Coordinator position to better manage volunteers across the system. One result is the Trail Stewards program in which volunteers monitor and in some cases maintain trails throughout the District. This program significantly improved customer service and focused staff repairs and maintenance, while reducing staff labor. It also creates dedicated friends who support the District's mission. In 2008, two District volunteers were recognized as the National Recreation and Park Association Great Lake Region Volunteers of the Year.

- ❖ Working closely with Department heads, continue to expand the use of volunteers and community service workers on projects assisting the District.

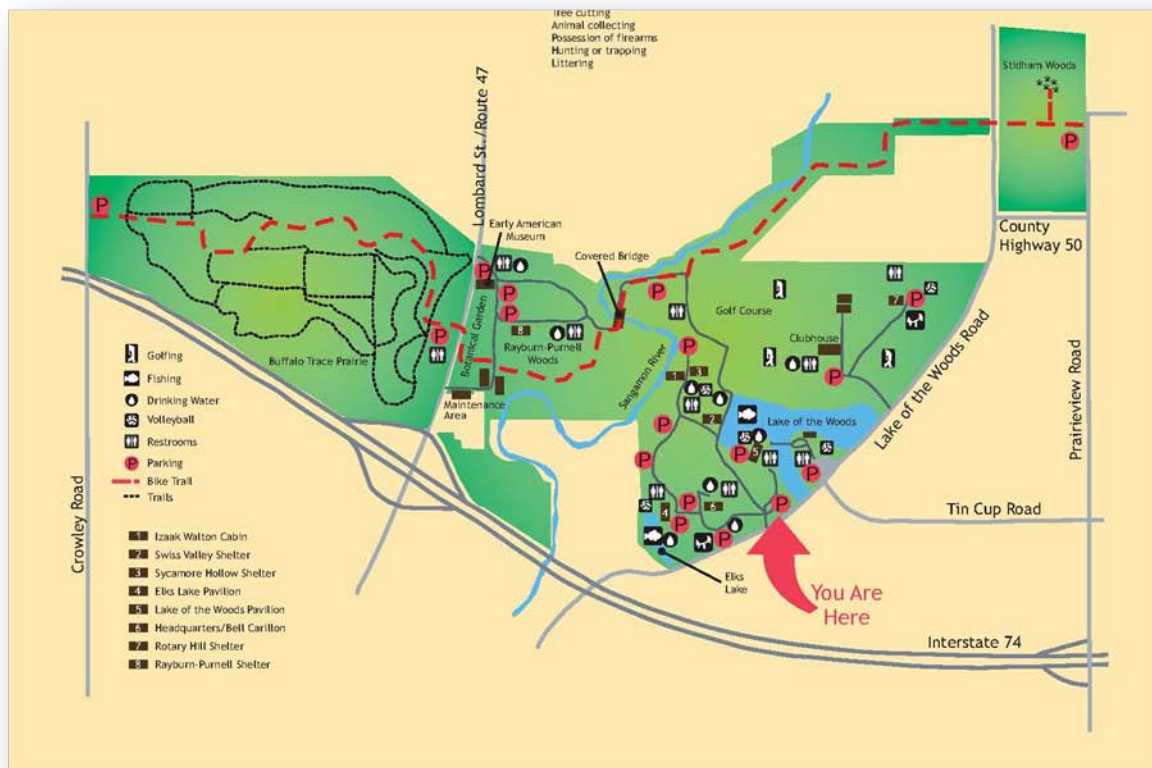
Section IV – Preserves and Facilities

The Champaign County Forest Preserve District is comprised of five preserves and several other parcels of land nearby or adjacent to the larger properties. Three of the preserves have facilities that house staff offices and contain enclosed buildings and open-air shelters which are used for programming and are available to the public to rent. Each preserve has its own amenities, ecosystems, and recreational opportunities. This, along with a balance of natural and managed landscape, gives them their unique identities. A recent addition to all preserves is a series of interpretive signs. They interpret the natural and cultural resources that visitors see and experience while serving as an observable commonality between its sites.

- ❖ Define ongoing preventive maintenance needs based on current facility conditions and build sustainable budgets based on this information.

Western Champaign County

Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve, *Mahomet*



Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve, originally named Lake of the Woods County Park, was the first project initiated by the District with a purchase of 260 acres in 1948. Subsequent acquisitions have increased its size to 900 total acres. Development within the preserve includes a golf course, picnic shelters, rental pavilions, biking trails, a carillon/observation tower, the Early American Museum, the Mabery Gelvin Botanical Garden, boat landings, boat rental,

administration headquarters and other miscellaneous maintenance facilities. Many environmental and cultural education programs take place here, with the Early American Museum and Discovery Garden located on site and the natural resources that offer interpretive significance.



Despite being the most highly-developed preserve in the system, about 56% of the site remains as woodland, water and other open space. With its variety of activities available to visitors and its accessibility to Champaign-Urbana via Interstate 74, this site continues to be the most convenient and most heavily-used property within the District. Fishing, picnicking walking, and biking are among the most popular activities at Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve.

Over the years a number of vehicle entrances have been eliminated as have the miles of interior roads which were converted to trails and parking areas. The amount of mowing has also been significantly reduced by naturalizing unused areas. These actions have decreased the time and cost involved in mowing and road maintenance. Less mowing has also increased habitat for birds and small mammals. However, these areas, like many in all the preserves, are being invaded by nonnative plants.

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| ❖ Repair or replace infrastructure as needed including roads, underground lines, the dam, trails and buildings, which are all suffering from age. |
| ❖ With collaboration from local governments and neighbors, connect the existing, paved bike path to more neighborhoods. This will make Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve more accessible and potentially lessen the need to expand parking lots. |

In fall of 1999, Grand Prairie Friends of Illinois (GPF) offered to collaborate with the District to attempt to create or restore prairie on District land west of Illinois Route 47. As a result Buffalo Trace was created. The site sits across the highway from Lake of the Woods Preserve. This high-quality prairie has mowed trails that attract many walkers and joggers.

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| ❖ Maintain the integrity of the ecosystems at Buffalo Trace by restricting development to trails only. |
| ❖ Address trail erosion problems and invasive species threats at Buffalo Trace, a unique and very popular location for nature enthusiasts, hikers, bikers and runners. |

Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve is the northern anchor for a riverside trail that could initially extend along the Sangamon River to River Bend Forest Preserve, a distance of about 6.2 miles. The success of this trail would depend on conservation easements or agreements with the Camp Kiwanis Girl Scout Camp, several private parcels, and the Village of Mahomet, which already has several areas along the Sangamon River. The project is listed in the Village of Mahomet's Master Plan as well as past District Master Plans. It was also a component of the grant proposal for the acquisition of the River Bend property.

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| ❖ Explore the potential to connect Lake of the Woods and River Bend via trail by working with the Village of Mahomet and interested local citizens and groups. |
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- ❖ Update District infrastructure to address failing water lines and other facilities throughout Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve.

Lake of the Woods Golf Course *Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve, Mahomet*

This facility is recognized as one of the premier courses in Central Illinois and is a major source of revenue for the District. Designed by Robert Bruce Harris, ASGCA, and opened for play in 1951, it has been an integral part of the District’s operation for more than 50 years. The course is one of only two downstate golf courses certified by Audubon International as an Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary. It has an 18-hole regulation course, a 9-hole Par 3 course, full-service pro shop, and a practice range.



In the last decade, a number of major improvements have been accomplished that have enhanced the playability and the aesthetics of the course. Most recently, a bioswale was constructed to catch runoff from the parking lot that formerly ran into the main lake. This will allow the water to slowly percolate into the ground. Other major improvements on the horizon include work on the sand bunkers, a revamped irrigation system, and updates to the Clubhouse.

- ❖ Address issues with sand bunkers that do not drain well after heavy rain and that have sand which is too fine and in some cases lacks adequate depth. These conditions vary in severity and some of the bunkers have already had the drainage problem addressed. The bunkers should be done on a phased basis to spread the cost over a number of years.
- ❖ Replace the irrigation system which is old and results in much time and money being spent each year fixing leaks.
- ❖ At least partially demolish and reconstruct the Clubhouse. This is the lowest priority and should come after the other two recommendations are completed.

Early American Museum *Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve, Mahomet*



The mission of the Early American Museum is to collect, preserve and interpret the history of East Central Illinois, specifically Champaign County, for the education and enjoyment of present and future generations. The museum was opened in 1968 at the Lake of Woods Forest Preserve, built with funds provided by public donation. The founding collection was a donation of 2500 pieces by William Redhed of Homer. In 1972, the museum received national recognition as it was accredited by the American Association of Museums. By applying the highest

possible standards in museum practices, the Early American Museum has maintained its accreditation through three subsequent accreditation reviews, most recently in 2007. The

museum fulfills its mission by collecting and maintaining artifacts and documents that provide perspective on human culture and life on the Grand Prairie of Champaign County. It furthers its mission by interpreting those artifacts and documents in permanent, hands-on, temporary, outreach and traveling exhibits; school and public programs; loan kits, resource documents, and a website. The museum maintains an educational hands-on collection which is used in exhibits, particularly the one-room schoolhouse (former Hensley Town Hall which was moved to the site). The education collection is also used by teachers, librarians, scout leaders and community members. The museum collaborates with the Champaign County Board, the American History Teachers Collaborative, the National Council of Negro Women and the Graduate School of Library Science at the University of Illinois to further its mission. In addition to general public visitation, each year more than 4,000 school children visit the museum and participate in field trips led by museum staff and volunteers. School programs provide direct contact with students and serve as a tangible reminder of the importance of local history and the museum’s educational purpose.

The District has created a conceptual design for a new, expanded facility which includes renaming it the Museum of the Grand Prairie. This center of learning and research will tell the story of this unique place during the last 15,000 years – from the continental glaciers that shaped the land, depositing what would become the most productive soils on the face of the earth, to the resulting unique plants and animals that thrived there, to the cultural influences of early native people making their mark on the land, to the settler farmers whose plow and drain-tile brought us the present-day agricultural economy based on corn and soybean production.

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| ❖ Given the uncertain global, regional, and local economic situation, postpone the pursuit of this major project until more favorable times. |
| ❖ Provide sufficient and adequate storage for museum collection and potential additions, including District historical records. |

Mabery Gelvin Botanical Garden, Discovery Garden, Miriam Davies Memorial Enabling Garden
Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve, Mahomet

The Mabery Gelvin Botanical Garden at Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve has been a popular attraction throughout the District’s history. Today it boasts some of the most beautiful and diverse flora in East Central Illinois. Many couples rent the garden for their wedding ceremonies. Its All-America Selections Display Garden features the newest and best bedding plants.



The award-winning Miriam Davies Memorial Enabling Garden is a picturesque addition that demonstrates how those with physical limitations can enjoy gardening. This multi-sensory environment is accessible and provides a hands-on experience through sounds, smells, textures, interpretive signs, and raised beds for low impact gardening. Although one of the most popular facilities in the District, the Botanical Garden is plagued with failing infrastructure, including the signature waterfall and its irrigation system.



Just behind the museum is the Discovery Garden. While the paths through the garden are not currently ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) accessible, it is a stimulating, multisensory environment that provides audible, tactile, and olfactory experiences. One will find a variety of vegetables, herbs, native plants, and flowers that offer a unique hands-on learning environment where visitors can learn about the relationship between plants, animals and people throughout history and today. The Discovery Garden moved to its present location in 2008, and expanded. In addition to general public visitation, more than 1,000 children participated in plant science-based programs in 2008. Programming is conducted by Environmental Education staff and volunteers.



- ❖ Incorporating the work of past planning efforts, create a realistic and appropriate plan for the future of these garden areas. Specifically address the leaking pond, deteriorating waterfall, irrigation line replacement, new walkway design and an energy-efficient greenhouse. All of this needs to recognize and reflect the limited staffing capability in the garden.
- ❖ Limit the involvement of garden staff in other areas within the preserve to allow them to better address needs in the Botanical Garden.
- ❖ Replace dilapidated greenhouse with smaller energy-efficient design and locate adjacent to the existing Botanical Garden shop and office.

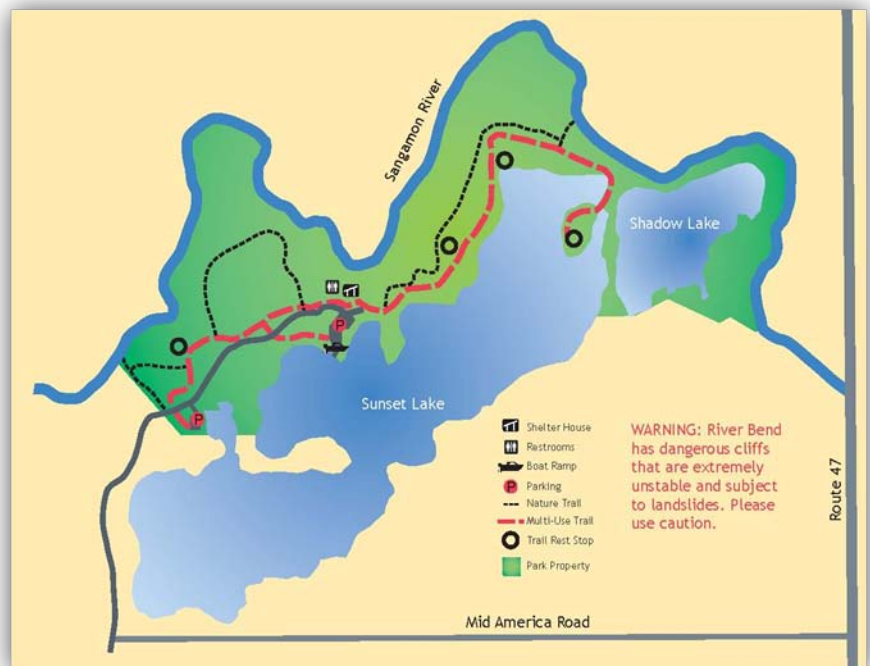
Riverview Retreat Center Mahomet

This 13-acre property was given to the Champaign County Design and Conservation Foundation (CCDC) by a consortium of local corporations in 1982. CCDC then leased the site to the Forest Preserve District, and in the fall of 1993, the now 23-acre site was transferred to the District. This wooded site is located along the Sangamon River, about 2.7 miles north of Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve, and has approximately 0.3 miles of river frontage. The cabin, which can accommodate up to 50 people, overlooks the Sangamon River. It is available for the public to rent on a daily basis for meetings and retreats.



River Bend Forest Preserve Mahomet

Once owned by the Mid-America Sand and Gravel Company, River Bend Forest Preserve's bargain sale/gift to the District in 2002 was aided by an Open Space Lands Acquisition and Development (OSLAD) Grant from the State of Illinois. This 275-acre



preserve is located along the Sangamon River in south Mahomet. The area contains two lakes, one of which is about 115 acres, the largest public water body in Champaign County, and protects 2.7 miles of the Sangamon River corridor. This property provides the potential for developing a 6.2-mile “greenway” from Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve through Mahomet and to this preserve. In 2006 an additional five-acre tract was added to River Bend. This parcel is part of the flood plain in the northernmost portion of land created by a bend in the Sangamon River.

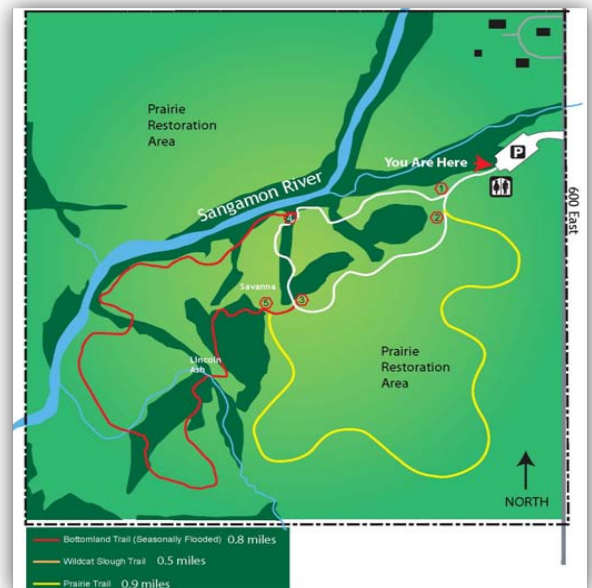


River Bend Forest Preserve is minimally developed which emphasizes environmental education, hiking, fishing, canoeing, birding, and similar passive activities. The wheelchair-accessible Possibility Pier provides safe access to the water for fishing. This unique structure parallels the shore, providing an outstanding shore fishing opportunity for Central Illinois.

❖ With the appropriate resources and conditions, be proactive in acquiring land around the current preserve boundaries to ensure the integrity of the site is maintained.
❖ Improve the aquatic and riparian habitat of the lakes by introducing native plant species which will provide cover and food for fish and other wildlife and reduce erosion.
❖ Extend Possibility Pier to the opposite shore to create a “water trail” feature that increases the amount of accessible shoreline and provides a unique recreation experience for people of all abilities.
❖ Beautify the entrance off Mid-America Road.
❖ Create a portage between the river and Sunset Lake at the point where the river and lake are closest. This would allow canoeists to use the existing parking lot as a pick-up point for river trips.
❖ Establish a demonstration area where a steep bank would be flattened to make a more gradual grade to the surface of the water. This would provide information as to the feasibility of reworking the banks in other areas of the preserve.

Sangamon River Forest Preserve *Fisher*

With the award of two grants, the Champaign County Forest Preserve District purchased 160 acres along the Sangamon River south of Fisher in the spring of 2008. The Department of Natural Resources, through its Open Space Land and Development (OSLAD) Grant program and the Illinois Clean Energy Foundation produced nearly all the funds needed to acquire the property. This parcel of land protects more than .6 miles on both sides of the Sangamon River, and includes the confluence of Wildcat Slough with the Sangamon. Minimal development includes a parking area, restrooms, and mowed trails. Future plans include further trail development and construction of a



picnic shelter. On the eastern edge of the property sits a c.1919 prairie-foursquare farmhouse and outbuildings. The home offers great interpretive potential, as it was sided with concrete blocks made by original owners from onsite materials. It is currently being used as an employee residence. Sangamon River Forest Preserve is an ideal setting for low-impact activities, such as picnicking, bird-watching, and hiking.



With the goal of restoring the landscape as closely as possible to its original presettlement conditions, original surveyors' maps guide the restoration of its landscape heritage. An outstanding transitional oak savanna ecosystem is being restored and maintained, and approximately 50 acres of historic prairie are being restored. To the District's benefit, the low, bottomland areas were already planted with thousands of native trees by the former landowners' involvement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program.

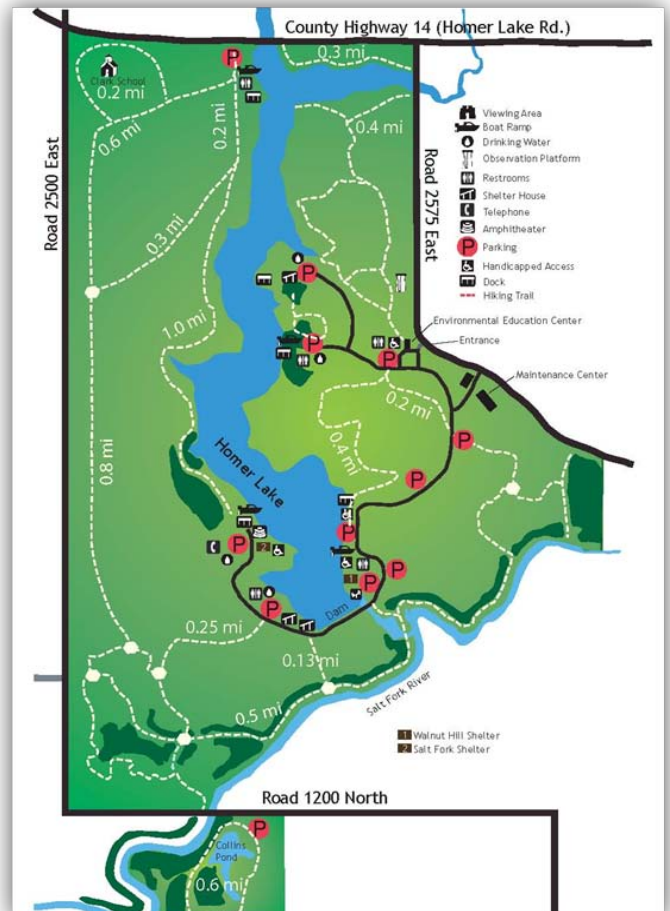
- ❖ Continue restoration efforts that create a landscape and ecosystems comparable to presettlement conditions based on original survey maps.
- ❖ Increase cultural interpretation of this site through programs and signs that tell stories of the area's first settlers and families who have resided in the home and maintained the land.
- ❖ Limit recreational development to minimize need for ongoing labor or capital investment. Planned development is limited to a picnic shelter, paved parking with associated bio-swale and hiking trails. Work with canoeists to determine the best means of assisting them with access to the river.

Eastern Champaign County

Homer Lake Forest Preserve *Homer*

The Illinois Department of Conservation (IDOC), now known as the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, put together in the early 1960s the basic land area contained in what is today known as Homer Lake Forest Preserve. The construction of the dam and spillway for Homer Lake was begun in the fall of 1967. In 1971, a 20-year renewable lease was negotiated between IDOC and the District for operation of the site. Subsequent land purchases and a land gift increased the size to 828 acres. In 1992 the land was permanently transferred by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to the District. In 2003, the name changed from the Salt Fork River Forest Preserve to Homer Lake Forest Preserve.

Homer Lake is a popular area for boating and fishing. One will find a variety of landscapes at Homer Lake Preserve including the quiet



setting of the Collins Pond area as well as the higher-use area of Homer Lake and its surrounding picnic area. The Salt Fork River runs along the southern boundary. Hiking trails lead visitors through wooded areas and prairie restoration sites. There is also a re-created wetland that establishes even more plant and animal diversity in the preserve. Many District programs take place at this preserve, with the Environmental Education Center located onsite. The Salt Fork Center, a large enclosed building, and Walnut Hill Shelter, an open-air shelter, are popular program sites and are available to the public to rent.

The Salt Fork River corridor is considered a core element for this preserve. The quality of this watercourse as well as the quality of water in Homer Lake and its two feeder streams is a primary concern in the management of the preserve. Land use practices in the watershed upstream from Homer Lake may impact the water quality of the lake. The tributaries deposit sediment and nutrients from their watersheds into the lake. While this settling effect results in cleaner water flowing into the river, it also results in the degradation of the upper end of the lake.

Currently there are 1.5 miles of Salt Fork River frontage within the Homer Lake Forest Preserve, including the Old Homer Park area. There is a strong support for efforts to preserve and protect this corridor.

❖ Develop the county’s first natural playscape to encourage self-guided recreational experiences for children and their families which will promote meaningful interaction with nature and each other.
❖ Implement as needed watershed protection projects recommended by the <u>Phase I: Diagnostic-Feasibility Study</u> (1999) of Homer Lake.
❖ Sustain a permanent environmental education presence.
❖ Plant and promote native vegetation. Do not simply allow old field succession to prevail.
❖ Take into account the District policy of “compatible use” when considering any development in Homer Lake Forest Preserve.
❖ Develop historical interpretation of the Old Homer Park site.
❖ Replace the bridge across the stream below the dam. This will connect the trails east and west of the dam and will enhance enjoyment of the river corridor.
❖ Selectively remove trees once planted in rows to enhance growth and provide for a more natural woodland appearance.
❖ Pursue the development of an accessible hard-surfaced trail on the Timberdoodle trail system that can be utilized by those with physical disabilities.
❖ Continue to acquire land within the watershed and along the Salt Fork River.

Environmental Education Center *Homer Lake Forest Preserve, Homer*

Located at Homer Lake Forest Preserve, the Environmental Education Center houses the main offices of the environmental education staff, and is one of the most comprehensive resource centers in the region. The building was constructed in 1976 and



used as the Trailside Visitors Center into the early 1980s. After sitting vacant for more than a decade, new life was brought to the building by the environmental education staff in 1993. Today, its displays interpret three main ecosystems of East Central Illinois (prairie, forest, and aquatic), and their importance to mankind. The center also offers curriculum guides, books, loan boxes, and resource kits to educators to supplement their students' learning experiences. Outside, visitors can experience interpretive hiking trails, an observation tower, and native prairie plots and landscaping. In addition to general public visitation, more than 3,000 schoolchildren annually participate in environmental education programs presented by staff and volunteers. The center also serves as an important resource for visitors with questions or seeking additional information about the District and the programs/services it offers.

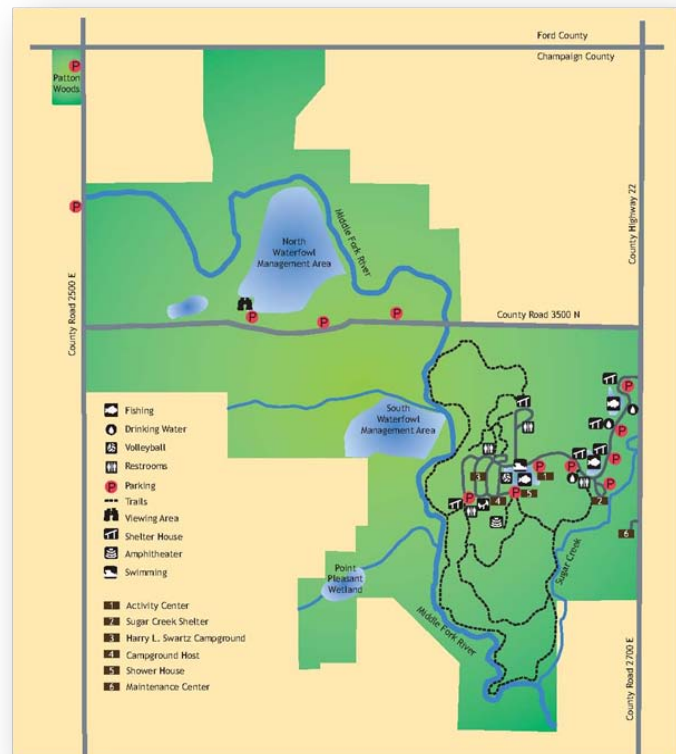
Northern Champaign County

Middle Fork River Forest Preserve *Penfield*

The Forest Preserve District began purchase of the Middle Fork River Forest Preserve in 1974, and by 1982 had acquired approximately 1,530 acres from nine owners. Since 1982, 78 acres have been acquired to bring the total acreage to 1,608. This is the largest and most diverse property in the District system.

The land is composed of scattered older mature oak-hickory forest in the uplands and bottomland forest near the river. There are also several reforestation plantings and prairie restorations. The preserve offers many hiking trails. Middle Fork contains one of Illinois' premier Waterfowl Management Areas. More than 130 acres of prime nesting habitat for migratory waterfowl are located here. An easily accessible viewing area allows visitors the opportunity to observe a wetland teeming with life. A more secluded, smaller sanctuary purposefully does not invite visitation so as to protect the habitat.

Facilities onsite include the Activity Center, an enclosed building, and the open-air Sugar Creek Shelter. Both are used for programming and are available to the public to rent. There is also a 64-site campground with a shower house and swimming beach. There are 50 electric sites, 12 nonelectric sites and two group camp areas.



The Middle Fork River is one of the most pristine rivers in Illinois and the Midwest as evidenced by the designation of a section in Vermilion County as a National Wild and Scenic River. The Middle Fork River forms the core of the preserve, and its continued protection is vital. The river originates in Ford County as a dredged ditch. The river traverses through good woodland from the western edge of the preserve to the county line, a distance of about 2.2 miles.



South and east of the current holdings, the Middle Fork River continues for about 3.9 miles to the Vermilion County line. The protection of this portion of the river corridor is important to the health of the river and the National Wild and Scenic River portion downstream. There may be an opportunity to work jointly with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Vermilion County Conservation District on a multi-county approach to river corridor protection.

❖ Continue to seek out acquisition opportunities for inholdings and adjacent lands as well as land along the Middle Fork River.
❖ Make improvements to Middle Fork’s extensive trail system to minimize damage from seasonal flooding.
❖ Establish a new trail extending to the “Odle Property” on the far north end of the preserve.
❖ Develop a business plan for Middle Fork to identify revenue-generating opportunities that would fund additional position(s) to maintain property and manage its natural resources.
❖ Develop an access road and bridge across Sugar Creek from the Maintenance Area to reduce operational costs and provide continuing access for staff use.

Tomlinson Cemetery and Patton Woods *Penfield*

Both of these properties are located in close proximity, but are not contiguous to Middle Fork River Forest Preserve. The Tomlinson Cemetery, a designated Illinois Nature Preserve, was transferred to the District for management in 1988. This pioneer cemetery contains 1.5 acres of outstanding remnant prairie.

Patton Woods lies just north of the Middle Fork River Forest Preserve. A 14-acre parcel was given to The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and was initially under a stewardship agreement with Parkland College. In 1993, the land was transferred to the District as an adjunct to the Middle Fork River Forest Preserve. In 2008, through a grant from the Illinois Clean Energy Community Foundation, the District was able to add a 4.68-acre parcel to the original 14, increasing the total acreage of Patton Woods to just under 19 acres.

Section V – Land Management

Acquisition Priorities

It is the District's priority to acquire lands along Champaign County waterways. All current preserves are located along one of the county's rivers – Riverview Retreat Center, Lake of the Woods, River Bend, and Sangamon River forest preserves along the Sangamon River; the Homer Lake Forest Preserve along the Salt Fork River; and the Middle Fork River Forest Preserve along its namesake river.

The acquisition and establishment of River Bend Forest Preserve in 2002 marked the opening of the District's first new preserve in 20 years. Since then, Sangamon River Forest Preserve as well as several smaller parcels of land have been acquired. This effort to preserve and protect the county's natural areas has helped raise awareness of the District and its mission as well as provide it with a more dynamic collection of natural and cultural resources. In recent years community members and organizations have approached the District with land acquisition suggestions and opportunities.

Natural Resource Management

A primary responsibility of forest preserve districts as stated by the Illinois Statutes is the preservation and protection of native plants and animals, along with scenic areas. Champaign County's forest preserves are managed with the intent of:

- conserving soil and water quality;
- promoting overall plant and animal diversity;
- providing habitat for a wide range of species; and
- maintaining wildlife corridors as natural passageways for the movement of animals between open space areas.

Management Methods

The District's preserves contain a diverse mixture of native and nonnative trees, shrubs, annual, and perennial herbaceous plants (Appendix VII). Although the flora has changed considerably in some areas as a result of nonnative plant introductions and increased urbanization, native plant populations remain. District vegetation management activities are designed to maintain native plant community dynamics which are suppressed when exotic species overtake an area. Some of the preserves contain areas of introduced nonnative species and agricultural or landscaped areas that require special management, such as the Botanical Garden at Lake of the Woods and landscaping around the built environment throughout the District.

The wildlands of the District are a dynamic system developed over millennia through complex physical and biological processes, under such influences as fire and grazing animals. Fire is a primal force that plays an important role in the natural cycle of ecological succession, and many plants and animals have adapted to and depend upon recurring fire. The District's Natural Resources Department has developed a prescribed burning program to naturally renew these ecosystems and keep them healthy by controlling exotic, or invasive, species. Fire management is also used as necessary to reduce or maintain woodland fuels at acceptable levels. Resource management methods implemented on a smaller scale include using machinery to uproot, crush and mow, disc or cut down vegetation.

Other restorative practices such as prairie and tree plantings help create and strengthen reclaimed ecosystems. Seed is acquired through donations and purchase as well as seed collection from existing natural areas in the preserves.

❖ Continue ecosystem and natural area restoration within the landholdings of the CCFPD.
❖ Prepare resource management plans for each of the preserves, focusing on restoration of presettlement conditions.
❖ Continue to share expertise with the public through public relations and outreach and coordinate the CCFPD research program (including requests for scientific research permits).
❖ Continue ongoing liaison with environmental groups including Master Naturalists and Trail Stewards.

Water Resources

District water resources are comprised of both surface and ground water. Surface waters include streams, rivers, lakes and ponds. Ground water consists of springs and wells that originate from water stored in underground aquifers. The potential beneficial uses of a water source are determined by water quality and quantity. Beneficial uses of water on District lands include recreation (fishing, swimming, boating) and domestic use. In areas where swimming is allowed, the District monitors water quality to comply with the water quality standards intended to protect public health.

Over the past decade, efforts have been put forth to improve water quality as it flows into lakes and streams. Several hundred acres of streamside riparian areas have been restored to limit the flow of sediment and pollutants into water bodies. Additionally, wetlands, purifying swales, and native buffers have been installed to capture and clean water.

There have been spotty records of water quality of CCFPD-owned lakes, streams, ponds and waterways. It is recommended that efforts be made to reinstate the programs that once monitored these areas. Two programs in particular, RiverWatch and the Illinois Lakes Volunteer Lakes Management Program, have been cut by the state, but a few determined organizations still train citizen scientists. Long-term continuous monitoring of water quality is the first step to developing sound management practices for bodies of water.

Wildlife Management

Terrestrial Wildlife

The diverse assortment of birds, mammals, reptiles, and invertebrates that dwell in the District’s preserves is an integral part of the ecology of the East Central Illinois region (VIII). The native terrestrial wildlife found within these preserves occupies a variety of habitats, and are well adapted to the Illinois climate and landscape. The District is responsible for the protection of all wildlife, including animals that are state- and federally-listed as rare, threatened, or endangered, and others of more local concern.

Aquatic Wildlife

The District fisheries’ program goal is to protect, conserve, enhance, and restore native fish and amphibian species, plus offer recreational angling opportunities to the public. As a part of this

effort, the District maintains Lake Management Agreements with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources on five of its lakes. The benefits of this cooperation include fish population monitoring, fish stocking, lake mapping, and management expertise to name a few. Fishing regulations are often put in place based on monitoring and stocking information.

Great efforts have been made to educate the public on aquatic exotic species. Additionally, some regulations have been put forward to decrease the likelihood of exotic species being brought into District waters. Exotic species pose one of the greatest threats to our aquatic systems by declining the native plant and animal populations.

Each body of water poses its own unique set of problems and opportunities. Because of this, specific management recommendations will be addressed in the preserve-specific Resource Management Plans slated to be written in 2010 and 2011. In the Resource Management Plans, each lake, pond, river, and stream will be evaluated separately.

Section VI - The Visitor Experience

The District serves a large constituency of unique individuals with varying interests, abilities, and needs. It is staff's goal to provide meaningful services and experiences to all, regardless of these distinctions. One way they do this is by continually striving to be at the cutting edge of natural and cultural interpretation.

From their daily routines to long-range planning, the education and maintenance staff alike strive to attract, accommodate and leave a lasting impression on the diverse population of Champaign County.

Interpretation

There are two areas of interpretation within the District recognized as established education program plans: Natural Interpretation and Cultural Interpretation. Both are supported in the State of Illinois Forest Preserve District enabling legislation. While the offices of the cultural education staff are in the Early American Museum's Annex at Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve in Mahomet, environmental education staff is based out of the Environmental Education Center at Homer Lake Forest Preserve in Homer, the Museum Annex at Lake of the Woods Forest Preserve in Mahomet, and in the summer, Middle Fork River Forest Preserve's Campground in Penfield. Even though they are physically separated, the cultural and environmental education staff operates as a single education department, using the Early American Museum's and Environmental Education Center's collections as well as the natural and cultural resources found throughout the five preserves as interpretive tools.

As part of an effort to strengthen collaboration between cultural and environmental education, the two areas work closely when developing program plans and marketing. They collaborate on exhibits and other nonpersonal media such as websites, brochures, and flyers and open their facilities to each other for research as well as program space.

Mission Statement: The mission of the Education Department is to collect, preserve and interpret the natural and cultural history of Champaign County and East Central Illinois.

Vision Statement: Through diverse experiences, we seek to inspire our audiences with a sense of connection to, and stewardship of, their natural and cultural world.

With this mission and vision, visitors will recognize themselves as a vital part of their natural and cultural communities – past, present, and future – thus, instilling stewardship. The region’s original ecosystem, the Grand Prairie, provides the touchstone for education and interpretation. These five interpretive themes are shared by the natural and cultural interpretive strategies and guide this process:

- Formation / Lifestyles of the Grand Prairie (positive and negative impacts)
- Adaptation and Survival on the Grand Prairie
- Migration and Forced Migration
- Technology, Communication, and Transportation on the Grand Prairie
- Humans as a Part of the Natural and Cultural Communities of Champaign County

❖ Continue collaborative interpretation between natural and cultural interpretive strategies as outlined in the Interpretive Plan.
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❖ Look for opportunities to broaden our audience base and the media forms we use to communicate with them.
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Accessibility

District staff takes pride in its ability to meet the special needs of visitors. With a wide variety of programs and activities, families and individuals with differing levels of ability or mobility are able to find something that is appropriate for them.

In all areas of development, the District concentrates on meeting the standards set by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Accessibility, as defined by the ADA, has been designed into all new structures, and many others have been retrofitted to provide proper access. Special events and programs at the District take place in or around one of the District’s many accessible buildings. Possibility Pier at River Bend Forest Preserve is in the category of universal accessibility as it provides the exact same experience for all visitors regardless of ability level.

In addition to physical accessibility, the District strives to provide meaningful educational programs and recreational experiences to all visitors. The Education Department ensures that its curriculum is easily adaptable to differing needs. Staff also takes this approach for exhibit development, interpretive signs and tactile learning environments, such as the Discovery Garden and Miriam Davies Memorial Enabling Garden. These enabling, or barrier-free, gardens provide a place for physically-, mentally- and emotionally-challenged individuals to experience the rewards and pleasures of gardening in an accessible environment. The gardens contain raised beds and sensory stimuli, such as the sound of falling water, the fragrance of herbs, and the feel of cool water and textured surfaces; and there is a shaded arbor for those who are sensitive to heat and sunlight.

One of the hindrances to greater public use of the forest preserves is the lack of public transportation to any of the preserves. People can only reach these areas by private conveyance, so if a family does not have access to a car they are precluded from enjoying the forest preserves and related programs.

❖ Conduct independent analysis and ensure all new facility development complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and work to retrofit existing facilities into compliance.
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❖ Continue looking for opportunities to provide universally-accessible experiences and facilities.
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